

IN THE CLAIMS

Please substitute the following claims 1-24 for pending Claims 1-20:

1. (Previously Amended) A kit for treating incontinence by implantation of a sling extending between first and second sling ends in a body pathway comprising:

an elongate needle that is sized and shaped to extend between a needle insertion end and a needle end opposite the insertion end to enable advancement of the insertion end through an abdominal incision in a patient's body and then through the patient's body tissue to emerge from a vaginal incision thereby creating a body pathway,

a coupler having an axis and extending between a first end and a second end and formed having a lumen extending axially into the coupler from an opening in the coupler second end, the lumen configured to receive and connect with the insertion end of the elongate needle following emergence from the vaginal incision by moving the insertion end of the elongate needle into at least a portion of the lumen, and

sling association means for coupling the coupler to one of the first and second sling ends to enable passage of a portion of the sling through the body pathway as the elongate needle is retracted from the abdominal incision.

2. (Previously Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to resist separation under an axially applied Separation Force of at least about fifteen pounds.

3. (Previously Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to resist separation under an axially applied Separation Force of at least about thirty pounds.

4. (Previously Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to require an axially applied Insertion Force of no more than about fifteen pounds.

5. (Previously Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to require an axially applied Insertion Force of no more than about ten pounds.

6. (Previously Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to require an axially applied Insertion Force of no more than about eight pounds.

7. (Canceled) The kit according to claim 1, wherein:

at least one of the first and second sling ends further comprises a sling associated needle having a needle body extending a needle tip dimensioned and shaped to be received in and connect with at least a portion of the lumen; and

the sling association means further comprises an opening in the coupler first end enabling insertion of the needle tip into at least a portion of the lumen, whereby the sling is coupled by the coupler to the elongate needle to enable passage of the sling associated needle and at least a portion of the sling through the body pathway as the elongate needle is retracted from the abdominal incision.

8. (Previously Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the sling includes an insertion sheath and the first end of the coupler is attached to the sheath by the sling association means.

9. (Previously Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the tip of the insertion end of the needle is substantially blunt.

10. (Currently Amended) A coupler for use in an incontinence procedure that utilizes a sling extending between first and second sling ends and an elongate needle that is sized and shaped to extend between a needle insertion end and a needle end opposite the insertion end enabling advancement of the insertion end through an abdominal incision in a patient's body and then through the patient's body tissue to emerge from a vaginal incision thereby creating a body pathway, the coupler comprising:

an elongate coupler body having an axis and extending between a first body end and a second body end and formed having a lumen extending axially from an opening in the second body end, the lumen bounded by surfaces configured to receive and connect with the insertion end of the elongate needle inserted into the body lumen by moving the coupler body and the insertion end of the needle together in a substantially axial fashion, and

sling association means at the first body end fixedly attached to one of the first and second sling ends for coupling the elongated coupler body to the one of the first and second sling ends to enable passage of a portion of the sling through the body pathway as the elongate needle is retracted from the abdominal incision.

11. (Canceled) A method of treating incontinence in a female patient comprising the steps of:

providing a first needle that is sized and shaped to be initially inserted through an abdominal incision and to then emerge from a vaginal incision, the needle having an insertion end and an end opposite the insertion end,

providing a coupler having an axis, the coupler having a first end and a second end with surfaces for connecting the coupler to the insertion end of the needle,

providing a second needle that is sized and shaped to be initially inserted through a vaginal incision and to then emerge from an abdominal incision, the second needle being attached to a synthetic surgical mesh having first and second ends and a plurality of holes that are sized and shaped to afford tissue ingrowth, and a removable synthetic insertion sheath associated with the surgical mesh,

creating at least one vaginal incision,

creating at least one abdominal incision,

initially passing the first needle through the abdominal incision and then through the vaginal incision,

connecting the second end of the coupler to the insertion end of the first needle,

connecting the first end of the coupler to the second needle; and

guiding the second needle from the vaginal incision to the abdominal incision with the first needle to implant the sling.

12. (Canceled) The method according to claim 11, wherein said second needle comprises a sharp tip and said coupler is adapted to receive and engage said sharp tip to provide a firm engagement and attachment between said second needle and said coupler.

13. (Currently Amended) The kit according to claim 1, wherein said ~~elongate~~ needle insertion end comprises predetermined needle surfaces, and said coupler comprises complementary internal surfaces of said lumen allowing for interlocking of said needle surfaces and said lumen surfaces to provide a firm engagement and attachment between said elongate needle and said coupler.

14. (Currently Amended) A The coupler according to claim 10, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to require an axially applied Separation Force of at least about fifteen pounds when connected to said needle.

15. (Currently Amended) A coupler for use in an incontinence procedure that utilizes a sling extending between first and second sling ends and an elongate needle that is sized and shaped to extend between a needle insertion end and a needle end opposite the insertion end enabling advancement of the insertion end through an abdominal incision in a patient's body and then through the patient's body tissue to emerge from a vaginal incision thereby creating a body pathway, the coupler comprising:

an elongate coupler body having an axis, and extending between a first end and a second end,

means for connecting the coupler to the insertion end of the needle by moving the second end of the coupler body and the insertion end of the needle together in a substantially axial fashion, and

a sling association structure at the first end of the coupler body fixedly attached to ~~configured to couple with~~ one of the first and second sling ends to enable passage of a portion of the sling through the body pathway as the elongate needle is retracted from the abdominal incision.

16. (Canceled) A coupler according to claim 15, wherein:

at least one of the first and second sling ends further comprises a sling associated needle having a needle body extending to a needle tip having a needle tip surface, and

the sling association structure further comprises an elongated lumen extending from an opening in the coupler body first end axially into the coupler body, the elongated lumen having a lumen surface configured to interlock with the needle tip surface by moving the needle tip into the lumen in a substantially axial fashion.

17. (Canceled) A coupler according to claim 15, wherein the sling association structure further comprises a fixed attachment of one of the first and second sling ends to the first end of the coupler body.

18. (Canceled) A coupler according to claim 10, wherein:

at least one of the first and second sling ends further comprises a sling associated needle having a needle body extending a needle tip dimensioned and shaped to be received in and connect with at least a portion of the lumen; and

the sling association means further comprises an opening in the first body end enabling insertion of the needle tip into at least a portion of the lumen, whereby the sling is coupled by the coupler to the elongate needle to enable passage of the sling associated needle and at least a portion of the sling through

the body pathway as the first elongate needle is retracted from the abdominal incision.

19. (Canceled) A coupler according to claim 10, wherein the sling association means further comprises a fixed attachment of one of the first and second sling ends to the first body end.

20. (Canceled) The kit according to claim 1, wherein the sling association means further comprises a fixed attachment of one of the first and second sling ends to the first end of the coupler body.

21. (New) The coupler according to claim 10, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to resist separation under an axially applied Separation Force of at least about thirty pounds.

22. (New) The coupler according to claim 10, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to require an axially applied Insertion Force of no more than about fifteen pounds.

23. (New) The coupler according to claim 10, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to require an axially applied Insertion Force of no more than about ten pounds.

24. (New) The coupler according to claim 10, wherein the needle insertion end and the lumen are mutually shaped and dimensioned to require an axially applied Insertion Force of no more than about eight pounds.